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## Cognitive transformation and spiritual growth: The matrix for discerning the wisdom of God (An exploration in Pauline discernment: part 2)<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on cognitive transformation and spiritual growth as fundamentals for the discernment of divine wisdom. This is the second part of two articles that explore Pauline discernment, specifically with reference to 1 Corinthians 2. For Paul, “being spiritual” encompasses a new way of thinking which is imperative for the discernment of the wisdom of God. It is only here, in 1 Corinthians 2, that Paul discusses the cognition of divine wisdom so comprehensively. In order for his readers to understand the “discernment of divine wisdom” he compares the spiritual person (πνευματικὸς), firstly, with the person who lives on an entirely human level (ψυχικὸς, 1 Cor 2:14-16); he does this in order to point out the radical cognitive differences between these two opposites. Secondly, he compares the spiritual person with the person moved by entirely human drives (σαρκικὸς, 1 Cor 3:1-3) to point out that the discernment of divine wisdom also relates to spiritual growth, which becomes perceptible in a person’s conduct.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1 Corinthians 2, the apostle Paul speaks about the wisdom of God – a wisdom that can only be discerned and comprehended by those who are spiritual (πνευματικοί). This wisdom is a divine wisdom, and a wisdom that Paul contrasts with human wisdom.<sup>2</sup> The Spirit of God has revealed it only to those who are spiritual (2:14-15). To date, little research has been undertaken on this text (1 Cor 2:14-3:3) and how it can contribute to a better understanding of the cognition of spiritual people in their discernment of the wisdom of God.<sup>3</sup> This research focuses on the cognitive transformation and spiritual growth that Paul had in mind when he writes about the discernment of the wisdom of God.

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1. This article is the second article on “an exploration in Pauline discernment”. The title of the first article is “Spiritual discernment according to 1 Corinthians 2: the Spirit and discerning the wisdom of God” which was published in DEEL 53, SUPPLEMENTUM 3, 2012. That article endeavoured to point out the relatedness and coherence of the different components that are involved in the process of discerning the wisdom of God (as explained in 1 Cor 2 by Paul). In that article, I also explained how Paul understood the process of spiritual discernment. The relatedness between the two articles is that in this article I have tried to point why Paul emphasises that only “spiritual persons” (πνευματικοί) can really discern the wisdom of God.

2. Pratt 2000:33; cf. Polhill 1983:329; Grindheim 2002:693.

3. See Francis, J. 1980. As babes in Christ. *JSNT* 7:41-60. Toussaint, S.D. 1968. The Spiritual man. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125:139-146. I am also aware that Campus Crusade for Christ has used the three types of persons reflected in this text (1 Cor 2:14-3:3) as a framework around which they have built their discipleship programme (see their teaching on “How to be filled with the Holy Spirit” in the document of *Five steps of Spiritual Growth*).

In literary terms, this passage clearly consists of two subsections: 2:14-16 and 3:1-4 in which he compares the *πνευματικοί* with the *ψυχικοί* and the *σαρκικοί*. In the first subsection, Paul compares the *natural person* (*ψυχικός*) with the *spiritual person* (*πνευματικός*). In 2:14 he describes the *natural person* and, in 2:15-16, he describes the *spiritual person*.<sup>4</sup> He uses the dichotomy between *ἄνθρωπος* and *πνευματικός* to emphasise the radical differences between the two in terms of identity.<sup>5</sup> In the second subsection (3:1-3) another comparison is found, between the *spiritual person* and the *fleshly person*, which enables Paul to point out also that discernment of the wisdom of God also relates to spiritual growth which becomes sensible in a person's conduct (3:3-4).<sup>6</sup> The three adjectives, *ψυχικός* (2:14), *σάρκινος* (3:1), and *σαρκικός* (3:3), all draw their semantic nuances from their mutual interaction with one another within a single semantic field in which the term of major contrast to all three is *πνευματικός*, *spiritual or pertaining to the Spirit* (Thiselton 2000:292).

But it must be borne in mind that, in this text, Paul refers explicitly to two extreme opposite groups: *natural people*<sup>7</sup> and *spiritual people*. The third group, *fleshly people*, is more closely related (3:1) to the *spiritual people*.<sup>8</sup> This group cannot be positioned, as in a continuum, between the first two opposites mentioned, although Paul clearly distinguishes them from and compares them with the spiritual group (3:1).

Paul's comparison of the natural person (*ψυχικός*) with the *spiritual person* (*πνευματικός*) will now be discussed; after this, I will discuss Paul's comparison between the *spiritual person* and the *fleshly person*.

## 2. RENEWAL OF THE MIND: A MATRIX FOR THE DISCERNMENT OF THE WISDOM OF GOD (2:14-16)

1 Corinthians 2 is saturated with semantic related verbs (*καρδία* *ἀνθρώπου* *οὐκ* *ἀνέβη*, *οἶδα* [3x], *κρίνω*, *συγκρίνω*, *ἀνακρίνω* [3x], *γινώσκω*, *ἔγνων*, *γινώσκω* [3x]) and a noun (*νοῦν*) about reasoning and the intellect of the mind. For Paul, the renewal of the mind is crucial for the discernment of the wisdom of God. In order to explain this, Paul contrasts the mind of the spiritual man with the mind of the natural man. Paul uses two adjectives to describe these people: the one in an attributive sense and the other in a substantive sense. In 2:14 the adjective serves an attributive function, attributing a quality to its head noun: *ψυχικός δὲ ἄνθρωπος*. In 2:15, the adjective functions as a substantive (like a noun). In this case the adjective is used without a head noun.<sup>9</sup> The adjective is here accompanied by the article *ὁ* in the phrase *ὁ δὲ πνευματικός* and functions as a noun. In verses 2:14-16,<sup>10</sup> Paul focuses on the

4. More characteristics are mentioned in the entire pericope: from 2:6 – 3:4.

5. See footnote 10 in connection with 2:14-15.

6. The adversative particle *ἀλλά* (but) with the negation *οὐκ* (*οὐκ ... ἀλλά*, 2:13, 2:1-2) introduce antithetical statements. This particle carries here its effect as an intensifier, which is best translated as “indeed” (Thiselton 2000:291). The uses of the negation, *οὐ δύναται* (4x in 2:14 and 3:1-2), also emphasise the contrasts. The emphatic negation *οὐ δύναμαι*, strengthen the contrast between these three groups of people. Thus, this whole text is about contrasts and comparisons.

7. In the rest of the article the plural will be used where necessary to eliminate gender issues.

8. I disagree with Toussaint (1968:140) that four types of people can be distinguished in 1 Corinthians 2:14 - 3:4 - the natural man, the spiritual man, the infant Christian, and the carnal Christian. In this article, I shall point out that the “infant” and “carnal” Christians refer to the same type of Christian.

9. [http://greek-language.com/gram mar/ 05.html](http://greek-language.com/gram%20mar/05.html)

10. In the previous subsection (2.2), it has already been pointed out that the selected text for this

two most diverse cognitive responses to the divine revelation mediated through the Spirit of God. From these verses it seems evident that, for Paul, there are those who did not accept this revelation. He refers to these people as οἱ ψυχικοί. In contrast with these people are the πνευματικοί, people who accepted the revelation.

Because Paul wants to focus on the discernment of the wisdom of God, he describes the perception of the spiritual person in far more detail than he does the perception of those who could not discern this wisdom. The following are the characteristics of the spiritual man, who is the opposite of those who are without the Spirit:

3.1 ψυχικὸς ἄνθρωπος	3.2 πνευματικὸς
<p><sup>2:12</sup> Now we have received not the spirit of the world,</p> <p><sup>14</sup> Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them,</p> <p><sup>14</sup> ...and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.</p>	<p><sup>12</sup> ...but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.</p> <p><sup>13</sup> ...but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.</p> <p><sup>15</sup> Those who are spiritual discern all things,</p> <p><sup>15</sup> ...and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.</p> <p><sup>16</sup> ... But we have the mind of Christ</p>

The table above (2:12-3:2) shows how Paul characterises both the spiritual man in comparison with the man without the Spirit. This comparison focuses on the cognitive level. The chain of thought here is progressively as follows: those who are natural have the spirit of the world. *Because they do not have the Spirit that is from God > they do not receive the gifts of this Spirit > it is foolishness to them > therefore they cannot understand them.* The mature (2:6), those who are spiritual, *receive the Spirit in order to understand divine gifts > are taught by Spirit > discern all things > are subject to no one else's scrutiny > have the mind of Christ.*

In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul introduces the reader to the so-called natural man and communicates the following about this person:

*Firstly, this person has no relationship with God:* the ψυχικὸς<sup>11</sup> ἄνθρωπος is a reference to the physical existence that is dependent on human abilities without the aid and illuminating work of the Spirit (cf. Toussaint 1968:140; Schweizer 1979:663; Garland 2003:100). By this adjective Paul is referring to an unbeliever, a person who has no relationship with Jesus Christ (Toussaint 1968:139f; Kistemaker & Hendriksen 2001:91; Pratt 2000:37). This person lives at a totally human level (cf. Garland 2003:101). The natural person's failure is not only moral, but also

investigation (2:13b-3:4) can be subdivided into two smaller units (2:13b-16 and 3:1-4).

11. This adjective occurs also in four other places in the New Testament: I Cor. 15:44 (twice); 46; James 3:15; Jude 19. In 1 Corinthians it refers to the physical human body. In James it is translated as "unspiritual" and related with earthly and devilish wisdom. Also in Jude it has a negative meaning and has been translated as "worldly people" and related to those who set up divisions and those who do not have the Spirit.

epistemological. Those who are spiritual and those who are natural therefore belong to two different worlds. They exist in not only separate, but also antithetical “universes of discourse”; in fact, there is no epistemological contact between them (Gaffin 1995:110f). This proves that there is a radical difference between these two people.<sup>12</sup>

*Secondly, this person does not receive the things that come from and relate to the Spirit of God.* The verb translated “receive” (2:14, δέχομαι) can also mean “welcome”<sup>13</sup> or even “accept” (Kistemaker & Hendriksen 2001:91). The natural person fails to accommodate spiritual truths in his life; they are also somewhat repellent to him. Having made this assertion (about the person without the Spirit), Paul explains why this is the case, which is evident in the following aspects.

*Thirdly, the natural person considers spiritual things to be foolishness.* He is incapable of understanding the revelation and teaching of the Spirit.<sup>14</sup> Paul’s point is that natural reason and intuition are completely unable to receive the divine realities unaided<sup>15</sup> (cf. Garland 2003:101). As Grindheim (2002:697) observes, the “appropriation of divine wisdom requires a special ability. Natural human beings lack this ability (2:14), which is an exclusive attribute of the Spirit of God (2:11b).”

*Fourthly, “he is unable to understand (γινώσκω) the things of the Spirit because they are spiritually discerned” (ἀνασχοίνω).* The verb *discerned* is quite significant here. It points to a continual process of evaluating the spiritual context in which someone lives. The passive voice used here denotes the fact that believers are guided by the Spirit of God, which enables them to test the spirits to ascertain whether they come from God (compare I John 4:1). Because they are submissive to God, Christian believers should judge all things spiritually (Kistemaker & Hendriksen 2001:92).

If a distinction is to be made between γινώσκω (to know),<sup>16</sup> as used here and οἶδα (know),<sup>17</sup> then γινώσκω is not merely perceiving things, but “embracing things as they really are”. Thus,

12. The radicalness is also complemented by Paul’s use of the dichotomy of ψυχικός δὲ ἄνθρωπος and τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ θεοῦ in the same verse. The negation, οὐ δέχεται, strengthens this even further.

13. See Louw and Nida 57.125 (receive) and 34.53 (welcome); Swanson 1997:#1312; Thomas (1998:#1209) “to receive: accept (2), accepted (3), receive (16), received (12), receives (15), take (3), taken (1), too (1), welcome (2), welcomed (1)”. According to Danker (2000:221) it means “to receive something offered or transmitted by another, *take, receive*”.

14. According to Kistemaker & Hendriksen (2001:92) the translation *to not accept* is the same as *to reject*. The repudiation of the things of the Spirit of God by the fleshly person is because he does not understand them and nor does he desire them. He accepts only the things of the world. This action becomes clearer in the next characteristic of this person.

15. Gaffin (1995:114) cites Calvin’s biting comments: “Faced with God’s revelation, the unbeliever is like an ass at a concert.” The ass is completely uninterested in the music and disturbs the concert with an irritating commotion. For example, some of the Epicurean and Stoic (cf. Garland 2003:101) considered “Paul a ‘babbler’ (Acts 17:18) and mocked at his preaching of the resurrection (17:32). Gallio regarded the dispute between Paul and the Jews as silly talk (Acts 18:15), and Festus thought Paul to be mad (Acts 26:24).”

16. “To arrive at a knowledge of someone or something, *know, know about, make acquaintance of*; to acquire information through some means, *learn (of), ascertain, find out*; to grasp the significance or meaning of something, *understand, comprehend*; to be aware of something, *perceive, notice, realize*; to have come to the knowledge of, *have come to know, know*” (Danker 2000:199).

17. “to have information about, *know*; be intimately acquainted with or stand in a close relation to, *know*; to know/understand how, *can, be able*; to grasp the meaning of something, *understand, recognize, come to know, experience* to remember, *recollect, recall, be aware of*” (Danker 2000:694f).

natural persons neither welcome nor embrace the realities found in the biblical text because they are “discerned” (ἀνακρίνω), that is, they are investigated and appraised to have a certain value by people who are aided by the (Kaiser 1981:318) illuminating work of the Spirit.

But it has to be borne in mind that those without the Spirit certainly can know (οἶδα) in the sense that they can understand spiritual truths (cf. Pratt 2000:37). Paul is not explaining the matter of the ability of unsaved people to understand spiritual things. Instead, he is describing the inability of these people to interact with the things of the Spirit of God. The word that Paul employs here (γινώσκω) does not simply mean “to know about”: it infers some form of recognition and acknowledgment. The word is used in this sense several times in the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> While those who are natural (ψυχικοί) may understand doctrine, they cannot interact with spiritual things. There is an explicit reason for this. The apostle states: “Neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Because those who are natural do not possess the Spirit, they cannot interact with spiritual realities. They are spiritually dead and insensitive (Toussaint 1968:141).

Opposite to the “natural man” (ψυχικός), according to Paul, is the “spiritual man” (πνευματικός).<sup>19</sup> By this term the apostle is describing a mature Christian (Toussaint 1968:142),<sup>20</sup> the one to which he refers in 2:6: “Yet among the mature (τελείους) we do speak wisdom, ...” This person, in radical contrast to the ψυχικός, has:

*Received the Spirit of God* (2:12): Spiritual persons are those Christians in whom the Spirit has really become the fundamental power of life (cf. Gal. 6:1). Gaffin (1995:114) comments that people are spiritual because they are “indwelt, renewed, enlightened, directed by the Holy Spirit”. They are the opposite of persons directed by the spirit of the world (2:12; cf. Eph. 2:2).

*Taught by the Spirit*: 1 Corinthians 2:13 reads:<sup>21</sup> “...but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual” (ἀλλ’ ἐν διδακτοῖς πνεύματος, πνευματικοῖς πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες). The verb διδακτοῖς (taught) refers to “that which is imparted by the Spirit to someone” (Danker 2000:241). This concluding phrase of 2:13 poses a problem for interpretation (Gardner 1994:138).<sup>22</sup> The gender of πνευματικοῖς, however, could be masculine or neuter, and the verb συγκρίνειν could mean “interpret” or “compare”<sup>23</sup> (Garland 2003:99; also Büchsel 1979:954). If the noun is taken as masculine, Paul could mean that he, by the Spirit, teaches the

18. See Matthew. 7:23; John 10:14-15; Romans. 7:7; 1 Corinthians. 8:3; Galatians. 4:9; 2 Timothy. 2:19.

19. In verses 2:1-5 Paul writes in the first person singular, referring to himself and how he communicated the divine wisdom. From verse 2:6 he writes in the first person plural to incorporate himself as one of those spiritually matured over and against “those who are unspiritual ... unable to understand...” (2:14).

20. The references to “infancy” and by implication “maturity” (influenced by τελείοις in 2:6) refer to fleshly and spiritual Christians. In the literary context of 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 they are derivatives used by Paul symbolically to describe the effects of fleshly and spiritual persons. They do not introduce new groups of people.

21. This statement has been discussed in a similar way in my other related article.

22. There is no uniformity among scholars about which is the best or most correct interpretation. It is not necessary to become involved in the debate here. See the following scholars for varying viewpoints and interpretations: Garland (2003), Thiselton (2000), Kaiser (1981), Ellingworth-Hatton (1995); Kistemaker-Hendriksen (2001) and Pratt (2000).

23. Balz & Schneider (1990:283) translated it as “compare in 2 Cor 10:12a, b. In 1 Cor 2:13 compare is less likely than interpret / explain”. For Swanson (1997:#5173) it means to “explain; express (NIV), interpreting (RSV, NRSV, NEB, REB), describe (NAB).” Louw & Nida (1996:I, 33.154) understand it as “to explain, primarily by means of comparison –to explain, to make clear”.

things of God and interprets spiritual truths to spiritual people (Rhyne 1990:175). If the noun is taken as neuter (see p 13), however, Paul means that he marries spiritual truths to spiritual expression (Kaiser 1981:317). According to the entire context (2:6-3:5) it is not an “either... or”, but rather a case of “complementing”. Both meanings are equally true and present in this text and can be interpreted as: spiritual truths (πνευματικά) come through spiritual expression taught by the Spirit who expresses these spiritual truths to spiritual people.

*Discern all things* (2:15): this subsection (discernment)<sup>24</sup> takes the previous subsection (teach) one step further.<sup>25</sup> As the Spirit “searches everything” (2:10), so do spiritual people “discern all things” (2:15). The discernment produced by the Spirit contemplates πάντα, “all things”. This echoes πάντα as the object of the Spirit’s searching activity in 2:10 (Gaffin 1995:115). According to Kistemaker & Hendriksen (2001:93) the expression, *all things*, signifies the broad spectrum of human existence. This does not mean that those who are spiritual are experts in every area of life. Instead, with respect to the community in which God has placed them, they are able to appraise all things spiritually.<sup>26</sup>

*The spiritual person is subject to no one else’s scrutiny*: the background to this remark is undoubtedly the Corinthian factionalism, which was based on judging the merits and demerits of certain authority figures. This leader is superior to that one, this idea to that (Fee 1987:118). Paul states that only those truly spiritual people are able to make proper judgements about these matters. Such people, guided by the Spirit of God, are not really subject to human judgement. Paul may be implying here that the Corinthian factions’ tendency to judge others may be a sign of their lack of the Spirit. It is impossible for the world to understand faithful Christians just as it is impossible for them, the world, to understand God Himself and His Word. Those who are natural, and in whom the Spirit of God does not dwell, cannot examine all things, particularly God’s ways that were formerly hidden, because they have no means, so to speak, of bridging the knowledge gap and cannot make correct assessments (cf. Fee 1987:118; Ellingworth & Hatton 1995:63).

*But we have the mind of Christ*: those who are spiritual are further characterised as “having the mind of Christ” (ἡμεῖς δὲ νοῦν Χριστοῦ ἔχομεν, 2:16). According to Willis (1989:118), the mind of Christ refers “to believers having their outlook shaped by an awareness of Christ.” Willis thinks that Philippians 2:5 provides an important clue for “understanding the meaning of the ‘mind of Christ’ in 1 Cor. 2:16”. This argument shows how Paul’s conclusion ties in with the disputes that cause him to plead with them to be of the same mind (1:10). Willis (1989:119)

24. According to Louw & Nida 1996:27.44a, study thoroughly; 56.12, investigate in court; 33.412, criticise; 30.109, evaluate carefully. Zodiates (2000:349) explains it as: “*anakrinō*, from the emphatic *aná* (303) and *krinō* (2919), to judge. To discern, judge (1 Cor. 2:14, 15; 4:3, 4; 9:3; 14:24); to examine or question in order to pass a judicial sentence (Luke 23:14; Acts 4:9; 12:19; 24:8; 28:18); to examine accurately or carefully (Acts 17:11); to inquire, ask questions in general (1 Cor. 10:25, 27).” According to Danker (2000:66): “to examine with a view to finding fault, *judge, call to account, discern* (Demosth. 57, 66; 70; POxy 1209, 19; 1706, 20) πάντα 1 Cor 2:15; pass. vs. 14f.”

25. For a more thorough discussion on discernment, see subsection 6: “The discernment of the wisdom of God” in my publication *Spiritual discernment according to 1 Corinthians 2: the Spirit and discerning the wisdom of God*.

26. Scholars disagree on the meaning of the adjective πάντα. Pratt (2000:38) interprets “all things” as that insight afforded by the Spirit of God to equip spiritual people with wisdom in all the areas of life. Thiselton (2000:272), influenced by Witherington and Poglouff, interprets it socio-historically. He asserts that, “As ‘spiritual people,’ many at Corinth saw themselves as ‘judging everything’ but as ‘being judged by no one.’ Paul then responds to this attitude.”

asserts, “Based upon other Pauline usage and the immediate context, then, the appeal ‘to have the mind of Christ’ does not mean to think Christ’s thoughts after him,<sup>27</sup> nor to have ecstatic experiences, nor to knowing proper dogma. The ‘mind of Christ’ is not focused upon special wisdom or experiences, but on community life.” This verse referring to the “mind of Christ” (2:16) is transitional and links Paul’s discussion of cognitive change (2:14-16) with the life in the community (3:1-4).

Paul requests for the mind of Christ as a paradigm for Christians to follow (Garland 2003:102): “And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor. 5:15). Brown (1995:145) adds to Willis’ explanation. He asserts that, “To have ‘the mind of Christ’ is to have a cruciform mind.” This relates to the basic discernment of the divine wisdom. This entails crucifying selfish ambitions, humbling oneself, and giving oneself for others (Garland 2003:102). Grindheim (2002:708-709; cf. also Garland 2003:100-102) aptly summarises Paul’s point: “To be spiritual... , then, is to have apprehended the word of the cross in such a way that it has transformed the entire existence of the believer into its image – to a cruciform life, a life characterized by self-sacrificing love, and where power is manifest through weakness.”

In conclusion, the “mind of Christ”, then, constitutes the framework or environment within which the discernment of the wisdom of God will and only can take place<sup>28</sup> (cf. Toussaint 1968:142). In his radical comparison of the ψυχικός with the πνευματικός Paul tried to emphasize how radical is the change in people’s mind and thinking when they become spiritual. This change is decisive for the discernment of the wisdom of God.

### 3. SPIRITUAL GROWTH: A MATRIX FOR THE DISCERNMENT OF THE WISDOM OF GOD (3:1-4)

In 2:6-16 Paul thinks in terms of an absolute dualism: Christian – non-Christian. He explains the necessity of a cognitive change in order to discern the wisdom of God. In 3:1-4 he changes the perspective to distinguish between mature and immature Christians (cf. Grindheim 2002:708) where Paul turns his attention to those people who are capable to receive the revelation of the wisdom of God by the Spirit of God (2:13-16), but who did not recognise it. The maturity that Paul wants the Corinthians to reach is characterized by nothing else than a realization of the implications of the state they had already reached as Christians. Their value system and consequent behaviour, however, are indicative to a lack of conformity with the gospel” (Grindheim 2002:708).

The following table is a comparison of those who have developed spiritually, the πνευματικοί, with those who have not developed spiritually, the σαρκικοί.

27. Pratt (2000:39) differs from this statement. According to him, it refers to: “They think as he thinks; they evaluate life as he evaluates it.”

28. Dunn’s (1998:250) understanding of “the mind of the Lord” adds another perspective which complements that of Willis and others. In the context of Isaiah, the answer to the question “Who knows the mind of the Lord?” is that only God can know these things. For Paul, those who are spiritual have access to the mind of Christ, which in turn gives clearer insight into the mind of God. This then implies that those who know “the mind of the Lord” will have clearer insight into “the depths of God”.



<p>3.1 σαρκικοί</p> <p>3:1 people of the <i>flesh</i>...</p> <p>3:1-2 <i>infants</i> in Christ...</p> <p>3:2 I fed you with <i>milk</i></p> <p>3:3 For as long as there is <i>jealousy and quarrelling</i> among you...<i>behaving according to human inclinations?</i></p>	<p>3.1 πνευματικοί</p> <p>3:1 <i>spiritual</i> people</p> <p>[2:6 <i>mature</i> (τελείοις)]</p> <p>3:2 (are fed with) <i>solid food</i></p>
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For those in Corinth who act according to the flesh Paul uses two related Greek adjectives, σαρκικοί (3:3) and σαρκίνοις (3:1).<sup>29</sup> Paul regards these people as being different from those referred to in 2:14 (by the adjective ψυχικοί). For Paul, these people are Christians and are different from the ψυχικοί. This adjective (σαρκικοί) describes those natural people who are completely lacking the guidance of the Spirit.<sup>30</sup> As Christians, the Corinthians are not ψυχικοί (cf. Fee 1987:123), but their behaviour testifies that they are still too much “of the flesh”. The adjective σαρκίνοις characterises them as being weak and sinful.<sup>31</sup> In Christian circles, *fleshly* (carnal) is a word that describes Christians who are not maintaining a good testimony.

Here in chapter 3 Paul is more directly concerned with the process of growth that leads to Christian maturity and a life that is entirely under the control of the Spirit of God. Here,

29. Some scholars contend that the adjectives σαρκικός and σάρκινος are essentially synonymous (Conzelmann 1975:72; Schrage 1991:281–82; Kuck 1992a:160; Wolff 1996: 64 n. 228; T. Schreiner 1998:392; R. Collins 1999:143–44). Others argue that σάρκινος in 3:1 emphasises the finitude and physical side of their existence versus the spiritual, while σαρκικός has negative ethical overtones (Fee 1987:124). The -ινος suffix connotes “made of” (cf. 2 Cor. 3:3), while the -ικός suffix connotes “characterised by” (cf. 9:11). Friberg & Friberg (2000:346) explicate σαρκίνοις “as relating to the earthly sphere of existence *worldly, earthly* (possibly 1C 3.1 and HE 7.16), opposite [of] πνευματικός (*spiritual, pertaining to the spirit*); in distinction from σαρκικός (*fleshly, carnal*), ζ. has to do with the body and living in the body; σαρκικός has to do with living for the body, i.e. to satisfy bodily desires; (3) as relating to human existence *natural* (possibly 1C 3.1 and HE 7.16); substantively σάρκινος *mere human beings*.”

30. Louw & Nida (1996:I, 694) define σαρκικός as “pertaining to the natural, physical characteristics of persons and often including their characteristic behavior—‘natural, human’.” Danker (2000:914) explains it as 1) “pertaining to being material or belonging to the physical realm, *material, physical, human, fleshly*”, 2) “pertaining to being human at a disappointing level of behavior or characteristics, (*merely*) *human*”. According to Schweizer (1977:144), σαρκικός means what is inadequate, what is not decisive before God. The inadequacy is such that it tempts man to be satisfied with it and consequently to lose God. See Dunn (2003:62-70) for a good explanation of Paul’s use of σάρξ.

31. The Corinthians are weak and sinful because they undermined the authority and gospel of Paul. It seems as if some of the influential members were “puffed up” against him (4:14–21). According to Rhyne (1990:174f), the factors that led to the schisms and the decline of Paul’s authority are more easily discerned. The Corinthians are fascinated with “wisdom”, a divine wisdom they hold to be imparted to them by the Spirit of God. Possessing this wisdom makes them “spiritual” people. They believe that true wisdom reveals itself in the rhetorical skills of its exponents. Such notions about wisdom may be a carryover from their past when they became fond of the orations of itinerant Hellenistic philosophers. They boast in the wisdom of their favourite preachers and, by implication, in themselves. While they consider themselves to be spiritual, they are not so sure about Paul: neither his person nor his gospel of the Crucified is impressive – at least, not by their standards.



this theme of Christian progress is implied with reference to babes, and in three different expressions that are translated “not ready” (οὐκ ἡδυνήθην, 3:1-2). These people have a longing for the material world and for prestige in the eyes of men. Basically, this statement implies a wilfulness to live in sin. Πνευματικοί Christians deserve censure and admonition because of their fleshly orientation; this is partly how Paul uses the word here. The Corinthians should have developed and matured in the Christian faith, but instead they stubbornly pursued their own selfish course and became fleshly Christians (Toussaint 1968:144).

In 3:1 Paul continues to reprimand the Corinthians by saying he could not address them as “spiritual persons” because they were in fact “fleshly” (σαρκίνοις). Since he also identifies them as “infants in Christ” (νηπίοις ἐν Χριστῷ) he must be making a fine distinction here: they “are spiritual, but live as if they did not have the Spirit” (Kuck 1992a:160).<sup>32</sup> As σαρκίνοις they are controlled by natural, human impulses and faculties rather than by the Spirit.

These fleshly Christians of 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 have the following characteristics. *First* (vv 1-2), *they cannot perceive and appreciate the more profound truths of Christ*, although they are old enough in the faith to be able to do so. To the Corinthians Paul says: “I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh” (3:2). These Christians have been Christians for years, but still cannot go beyond the ABCs of doctrine (Toussaint 1968:144). Their problem is not failure to progress, but they have failed to comprehend (Francis 1980:57; cf. Garland 2003:106). One clear proof of their immature behaviour is that they view Paul’s teaching as milk rather than solid food (3:2) (Rhyne 1990:176).

In accordance with this dichotomy, Hooker (1966:21) adds a new perspective. She comments, “Yet while he uses their language, the fundamental contrast in Paul’s mind is not between two quite different diets<sup>33</sup> which he has to offer, but between the true food of the Gospel with which he has fed them (whether milk or meat) and the artificial substitutes which the Corinthians have preferred.” The fact is that Paul’s solid food does not differ from his milk (Hooker 1966:21; cf. also Gaffin 1995:119f). They could not discern the “solid food”.

They yearn for the more exquisite charms of clever oratory, which made the simplicity of the word of the cross seems weak (cf. Garland 2003:109) and elementary.<sup>34</sup> If Paul’s message looks like milk to them, this shows that they are not as mature or spiritual as they think. The divisions that they have caused are incompatible with following Christ because they emulate the world’s wisdom. This means that “they do not need a change of diet but a change of perspective” (Fee 1987:292). The issue here is their behaviour now, not their progress in understanding.<sup>35</sup> These

32. See Gaffin (1995:113) for a different understanding.

33. Garland (2003:108) agrees on this point. According to him, Paul does not divide Christians into lower-level beginners who need to be fed a diet of theological substance and an upper-level elite who can receive advanced, esoteric doctrine, as if Christianity were like the pagan mysteries. Nor does he offer a two-stage wisdom, leading believers to the next stage of more esoteric lessons when he thinks they can handle it. In 15:3–7, he reminds them that he delivered to them as of first importance Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Cf. also Gaffin 1995:119f.

34. Soards (1999:67) comments, “They could not digest the solid food of the message of the cross because they were looking for a wisdom different from God’s revealed wisdom.”

35. The contrast is not between the present and the past, but between that which is from God and that which is of the flesh. Note how the two different systems of power and wisdom are designated by Paul: on the one hand, “of this age” (1:20; 2:6, 8), “of the world” (1:20, 21, 27, 28; 2:12), “according to the flesh” (1:26, 29), “of human beings” (1:25; 2:5, 13), and on the other hand, “of God” (1:21, 24, 25; 2:1,

spiritual people are simply thinking and behaving like unspiritual people – like unbelievers (Rhyne 1990:175). Just as “the mature” correctly discern the foolishness of the gospel to be the highest wisdom, so the immature incorrectly discern this “milk” to be solid food.

*The second characteristic (3:3-4) of the fleshly Christian is selfishness and pride.*<sup>36</sup> These characteristics manifest themselves through the envy, strife, and divisions experienced at Corinth (3:3, “For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, ...”). Blinded by conceit, these Christians live only for themselves and consequently cannot get along with others. In fact, their disagreement, caused by selfish ambitions that have crushed the wisdom of the cross, proves their immaturity. By fancying themselves to be wise and mature, the Corinthians have cut themselves off from the transforming power of the cross, a power that can change their worldly ways (Garland 2003:107; cf. also Bultmann 1968: 239f). In 3:3 Paul depicts them as still being σαρκικοί, which is ironic in a congregation that valued its spiritual giftedness. The use of the adjective σαρκικοί thus refers to these Corinthians’ values, attitudes, and judgements, which manifest themselves in self-centredness, self-indulgence, and arrogant self-sufficiency (Garland 2003:110), all of which lead to a certain kind of behaviour and conduct. For Bultmann (1968:239), “This self-delusion is not merely an error, but sin, and a turning toward the creation – and to do that is to trust in one’s self as being able to procure life by the use of the earthly and through one’s own strength and accomplishment.”

*Discernment and pragmatics:* such self-centredness, self-indulgence, and arrogant self-sufficiency is addressed by Paul in 3:3-4: “For you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is *jealousy and quarrelling* among you, are you not of the flesh, and *behaving* according to human inclinations? 4: For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you not merely human?” In this reference, it becomes evident that right discernment is not only made in a good and theoretical explanation of the (text of the) wisdom of God, but also in conduct and behaviour that does justice to the pragmatic aspects of this wisdom. The discernment of the wisdom of God is always a discernment that results in interrelated conduct. From the viewpoint of spirituality, self-surrender to the praxis of the divine wisdom is an important element in the understanding and realisation of the will of God. Those in the early church could see the right explanation of the wisdom of God not in what someone says (this may be correct), but in what someone does. The discernment that explains the divine wisdom is always a practical and concrete exercise. This is also closely related to what Paul says in 2:16: “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.”<sup>37</sup>

*To conclude:* it is not that Paul could not or would not give them wisdom in the form of solid food; they failed to recognise that what he gave them was wisdom; in other words, they could not discern the wisdom of God. If there is any distinction between the “mature” and the “infants”, it is this: “Both the immature and the perfect are affected by the same revelation, but only the perfect penetrate what happens to them and in them” (Theissen 1987:352).

Opposite to the σαρκικοί, but in related terms, Paul characterizes further the πνευματικοί. By

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7,12), “of the Spirit” (2:10, 13, 14), and “of Christ” (2:16). These designations clearly point toward a fundamental dualism between that which is without God and that which belongs to God, rather than to a dualism between the before and the now (Grindheim 2002:699).

36. See also James 4:1-3.

37. See an explanation on the practical meaning of this verse in my article “*Spiritual discernment* according to 1 Corinthians 2: the Spirit and discerning the wisdom of God.”

contrast to the σαρκικοί, whom he typified as “infants” (νηπίοις) he refers to the πνευματικοί as “full grown” (spiritually mature, 2:6): “We speak wisdom among them that are full grown.”<sup>38</sup> The wisdom which Paul preached was better comprehended by the mature (τέλειος)<sup>39</sup> Christians at Corinth than by the immature. In both 1 Corinthians 2:6 and 2:15, Paul recognises that some Christians are more developed than others, although both had entered into the truths which he preached. They have exercised their senses to discern both “good and evil”. Discernment is the result of the exercise and use of spiritual faculties, and this can only come with time and a determination to really know the gospel. Although this Christian congregation is still very young, Paul already expects its members to show a form of maturity. The mature Christian of 1 Corinthians 2:6 appreciates the wisdom of God, and the spiritual man<sup>40</sup> of 1 Corinthians 2:15 apprehends it. It becomes quite clear that the two terms describe the same person.

In *conclusion*: who, then, is the spiritual person? By this term Paul is describing a mature Christian. It is this person that Paul sets forth as the ideal of every Christian. For these people who have received the Spirit, there is a different way of viewing reality. What appears foolish to the world is seen in its true light as God’s ultimate wisdom. For them, a transformation has taken place; they no longer live and think on a purely natural level, but are guided and enlightened by God’s own Spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 5:161).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, Paul negates the humane involvement in the communication and discernment of the “wisdom of God”. In contrast, he emphasises the role and power of the Spirit in communicating God’s wisdom to the believer: the Spirit of God (τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ θεοῦ) who teaches spiritual truths (πνευματικοῖς) in spiritual words<sup>41</sup> (πνευματικῶς) to spiritual people (πνευματικοί). Because this wisdom is revealed and inspired by the Spirit, only a spiritual person can discern the exclusive divine wisdom, of which the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus form the most important content.

The emphasis in this essay is not to categorize people or believers in different groups but to emphasize how Paul uses contrast to cause effect how the true discernment of the wisdom of God can happen. This research shows why those who are spiritual can discern the divine wisdom. Paul points out two fundamental and related matters involved in the discernment of the wisdom of God: to have undergone a radical intellectual change and to continue changing. He describes these two matters in a comparative way. He compares those who are spiritual (πνευματικοί) with (1) those who live on an entirely human level (ψυχικοί) and (2) those moved by entirely human drives (σαρκικοί). In the first comparison of the πνευματικοί with the ψυχικοί, Paul refers to their epistemological cognitive differences. He compares their intellectual faculties. It is striking how 1 Corinthians 2 is saturated with semantic related words on cognition. For Paul, before anyone can discern the divine wisdom, that person has to undergo a radical intellectual change and renewal, a change and renewal that can only be performed by the Spirit of God. In the second comparison of the πνευματικοί with the σαρκικοί, Paul emphasises the continuity of change that should take place in a person’s

38. Such maturity is also implicit in 3:1-4.

39. Thiselton (2000:289) interprets it as “*grown up, adult*,” and Danker (2000:#5455) as “being mature, *full-grown, mature, adult*”.

40. This person could be fed with solid food (3:2).

41. Or “...in a spiritual way...”

life. For Paul, only those who are spiritual and continue to live a spiritual life can increasingly discern the exclusive wisdom of God through the mediation of the Spirit of God.

Because of their discernment, Christians may be considered to be spiritual, but they are never to cease their spiritual development. As Paul says: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil. 3:12).

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## KEY WORDS

Discernment  
Wisdom of God  
Cognitive transformation  
Spiritual person  
Natural person  
Fleshly person

## TREFWOORDE

Beoordeel/besluit  
Wysheid van God  
Kognitiewe verandering  
Geestelike mens  
Natuurlike mens  
Vleeslike mens

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